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ABSTRACT

Absenteeism is expensive in terms of academic achievement, economic loss to school districts, and teacher efficiency. Most importantly, however, truancy is expensive because it is a lost opportunity to rehabilitate a large number of distressed youngsters. A number of studies have demonstrated that schools are not equipped in either organization or effective strategies to work with alienated students. Others have suggested that schools need to develop a system for monitoring and treating truancy. Several generic discipline strategies are available for managing undesired behavior. This study offers a basis for rehabilitating individual truants with a diagnosis-treatment paradigm. The Indiana Student Scale, a self-esteem scale, was generated from semistructured interviews with 55 truant and nontruant students. The scale was then administered to 52 truants and 54 nontruants in three high schools. Statistically significant differences were found between the two groups with respect to self-esteem as well as on each of five subscale dimensions (power, competence, affiliation, physical appearance, virtue). The results suggest that students who are truant have significantly lower overall feelings of self-worth than do nontruants. The next step is to develop explicit treatment programs for rehabilitating the self-esteem of these truant students. A bibliography of three pages is included. (Author/NB)

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TRUANCY/SELF-ESTEEM

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TRUANCY/SELF-ESTEEM

PAPER PRESENTED AT AERA, SAN FRANCISCO

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Abstract:

Absenteeism is expensive in terms of acacemic achievement, economic loss to school districts and teacher effeciency. Most importantly however, truancy is expensive because it is a lost opportunity to rehabilitate a large number of distressed youngsters.

A number of studies have demonstrated that schools are not equiped in either organization or effective strategies to work with alienated students. Others have suggested that schools need to develop a system for monitoring and treating truancy. Several generic discipline strategies are available for managing undesired behavior. This study offers a basis for renabilitating individual truants (problem students) with a diagnosis-treatment paradigm.

A self-esteem scale was generated from numerous semistructured interviews with truant and nontruant students. The scale was then administered to fifty-two truants and fifty-four nontruants. Statistically significant differences

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were found between the two groups with respect to self-esteem as well on each of five subscale dimensions. The next step is to develop explicit treatment programs, given the power to identify individual self-esteem deficiencies.

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Absenteeism as an Educational Issue

Duke and Jones (1983) in their review of deviant school behavior issues, research, and recommendations identified truancy as the number one behavioral problem of the eighties. School Administrators agree. For the last 12 years an annual poll conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals has consistently listed student absenteeism as a major problem. In several of these years absenteeism was ranked as the most serious of all educational problems by the responding principals.

Absenteeism is a long term concern. In 1884 only one of three youngsters legally required to attend school did so. In 1933 Hicks reported that less than 50 percent of school absenteeism was due to illness. A survey of 48 California schools selected randomly in 1979 revealed attendance levels of 90.8 percent, 87.7 percent and 81.4 percent for elementary, junior high and senior high schools respectively. Nationally about 90 percent of the enrolled students attend schools each day. The Educational Research Service (1977) reports that urban systems such as Philadelphia, Baltimore and New Orleans have several schools with an average of 30 percent truancy. Benjamin Franklin High School in New York City has an annual attendance rate of 48 percent. Teachman (1979) indicated that in some Detroit high schools from 30 to 50 percent of the students who are in school on a particular day do not attend at least one scheduled class.

Plausible explanations for school absenteeism include the following: Health problems, parental choice, school phobias, truancy, and school related absence for such reasons as extracurricular activities.

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Absenteeism of any kind is critical on at least three accounts: (1) Academic achievement. Recent studies such as Rosenshine and Berliner (1978), Lomax and Cooley (1979), and Rieth, et al., (1981) have shown that academic achievement is a direct function of time-on-task. It follows that to whatever degree students are absent from school academic achievement will be diminished. (2) Economics. Financial aid to schools in many states is a function of daily attendance. For instance in California a student's absence costs a high school district $9.00 per day. Dufour (1983) added $329,596 to his schools funds by changing attendance from a daily average of 87 percent to 97 percent. (3) Teacher efficiency. Reason suggests that conferring with returning students about missed assignments, rescheduling tasks and reorienting students to ongoing activities are disruptive and time consuming.

Truancy is worthy of attention for two additional reasons: (1) Personal-Social Problems. Perhaps the most critical aspect of the issue is the strong relationship between truancy and personal problems. In studying adolescent delinquency Walberg (1979) considered a wide variety of psychosocial factors endemic to the deviant behaviors of 430 students from three Chicago high schools. Truancy, with a correlation of .67, $p = .01$, showed the highest propensity toward delinquency. Tyerman (1968) reported that truancy was repeatedly associated with general emotional problems, dissatisfaction with life, unsociableness and failure to persevere. Nelson and Gerber (1979) interviewed 33 junior high school chronic truants. They found that when these youngsters were in school they were in constant trouble for stealing, fighting, drinking alcohol and using drugs, disrupting class and vandalism. Four of the 33 students had attempted suicide.

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From a different perspective Vedder and Thomas (1979) found that 566 or 89 percent of the 634 inmates of a state prison had a history of school truancy. These data strongly suggest that school truancy is an important signal of pervasive personal-social problems.

(2) Treatment. Duke and Mechel (1980) conducted a case study of two secondary schools in Los Angeles. Chronic absenteeism involved about 25 percent of the students. Duke and Mechel (1980) concluded from this and other indepth studies that schools are not sufficiently prepared in either organization or knowledge about the offending students and corrective strategies to effectively deal with the issue. Lytle (1986) reported from a survey of 142 school districts, "If most school districts are like those in North Carolina, there is a good chance their student discipline policies are outdated, in violation of state and federal law, or simply nonexistent." Washington (1973) discovered that school response to deviancy often serves as a stimulus to more deviancy. There is little in the literature of school truancy to challenge this conclusion.

Most of the reported treatments employ some form of coersion: call parents, detentions, suspensions, corporal punishment, expulsion, and referral for court action. Three reportedly successful treatments will serve as examples. Dufour (1983) has increased daily attendance from 87 percent to 97 percent by employing the following procedures: Paraprofessionals monitor and chart the whereabouts of each student each period. Counselors, attendance clerk, the dean of students and paraprofessionals meet once each week and examine the attendance charts. Counselors call parents

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within one day of any questionable absence, even if the issue is one missed class period. Every unexcused absence is inevitably punished. Perfect attendance is rewarded.

In Santa Maria, California (1983) a coordinated sweep by the local police, the sheriff's department and the school administrators netted 29 truants. The truants were jailed and parents were called to bail them out. Evidence of the program's success was threefold: In the third such sweep within six months only ten truants were arrested. One of the offenders was quoted as saying, "When that jail door clanged shut, I knew I didn't want to be there." The Association of California School Administrators selected the sweep in 1983 as an exemplary project. No data were given as to changes in attendance patterns.

Kaiser (1984) reported that in 1979-80, 5.5 million American students were suspended for truancy. Ten percent of the schools suspended nearly ten percent of their students. Many students miss as much as ten days of class instruction per year for some form of suspension.

Punitive and coersive processes are common but they are only effective on a short time basis without pervasive monitoring. Alternative strategies are available.

Duke (1980) persuasively argues that the problem can be solved by reorganizing schools and their relationships with communities. Englander (1986), Charles (1985), and Wolfgang and Glickman (1980) offer a number of intervention models that might be utilized to induce attendance. A third alternative is to focus treatment on the truants as individuals. That is, to diagnose and rehabilitate the personal qualities that differentiate the truant-disruptive student from the normal population.

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The purpose of this study is to identify and test the efficacy of self-esteem as a relevant personal construct.

The Search for Relevant Variables

A review of the literature shows that most studies of truancy have focused on demographic data. Of thirty studies published over the last decade fifteen have tallied student records. Several others were based on questionnaires distributed to school administrators and parents. Nielson and Gerber (1979) and Zieman and Benson (1980) directly interviewed truants. These interviews were enlightening but focused on such external phenomena as status of family, activities when truant, reaction to counter-measures, favorite subjects and feelings about teachers with little attention to the students' feelings about themselves. Nielson and Gerber did not include interviews with nontruants for comparision.

Only four of the thirty published studies were experimental in that systematic theoretically based treatment was employed. One study with an n of 32, counseled the students in an unknown way. A second study tutored a single student and the other two studies employed behavior modification contracts with four students.

In a purely exploratory investigation in 1983 we interviewed eight middle school students whom the principal had identified as being problem youngsters prone to truancy. These students were anguished. They identified themselves as the Lowlifers. The expressed explanation for this label was, "That's what everyone thinks we are.", "That is what they call us." and "Because that is what we are."

Though half of these students were fairly articulate, schooling represented a succession of failures. All of them lamented their lack

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of power within the school setting. The expressed feelings were primarily resentment. Though three of the students were aggressive the others displayed passive withdrawal behaviors. These data along with the conclusions drawn from Walberg (1979), Tyerman (1968), Nelson and Gerber (1979), Vedder and Thomas (1979) and Berman and Natriello (1980) suggest that truancy is linked to the construct of depressed self-esteem.

Though truancy may be linked to low self-esteem more specific details are needed before corrective programs can be arranged. In particular, we need to better understand the perspective of individual truants. As Zweig and Ducey (1980) conclude, "The youngsters' difficulties and non-acceptance in school and in the community result in his or her feeling alienated. Beyond speculating, no one has yet explored what the measurable conditions are that create a sense of alienation." (1980, 246).

The Efficacy of Self-Esteem

The first step in our research was to develop a measure of self-esteem that embodied self-evaluation and focused on concerns of adolescents. Fifty-five high school students were individually interviewed under semi-structured conditions to elicit self evaluative statements with respect to power, affiliation, body image, competence, and virtue. Approximately, half of the students were truants as evidenced by ten unexcused absences during the previous semester. The status of the individual subjects were unknown to the interviewer. The interviews were recorded on audiotape. The transcripts were then analyzed and the student self-referent statements were used as a basis for developing the Indiana Student Scale, ISS-1.

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Some form of the ISS was then administered to 106 students from three high schools. Fifty-four of the students were truants and fifty-two were nontruant. One of the schools was a consolidated rural school, the second was a suburban high school and the third was in a modest sized city in Southern Indiana.

The scale was modified slightly in succeeding administrations so the data were not combined. The Cronbach Alpha for the ISS was found to be .88, .91, and .92 respectively for the three samples. The difference between the self-esteem of the truants and nontruants were found to be significant beyond the .01, .002, and .02 levels in the respective schools. It appears that students who are truants have significantly lower overall feelings of self worth than do nontruants.

The data was also analyzed with respect to each of five subscales. Power as measured by such items as "I can be whatever I choose to be." significantly differentiated the two groups at the .007, .006 and .02 levels respectively. Competence as illustrated by such items as "I can only do my school work if someone helps me." significantly differentiated the truants from the nontruants only at the rural consolidated school but that was at the .001 level. Affiliation, measured by such items as "Most people are better liked than I am." significantly differentiated the truants from nontruants at the .04 and .007 levels at two schools. Likewise, physical appearance as identified by such items as "Most people would say that I'm nice looking." differentiated the two groups beyond the .01 level at the two schools. The most significant subscale differentiation was for virtue as measured by such statements as "Other people would not like to be like me." and "I am sometimes ashamed of what I do

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at school." The level of significance was beyond .02, .001, and .0005 at the respective schools. Cooper (1984), who studied truancy in England, noted that many of the truants saw themselves as being lazy, disruptive and not very truthful. Truants get the message that most schools tend to convey with their hostile response to undesired behavior. With respect to the five subscales, the truants of the rural and suburban schools were differentiated from the nontruants beyond the .05 level on nine of ten analyses. At the moderate sized city school two of the five subscales showed significant differences. In this latter school arrangements were made by phone and rather than truants as such the counselors selected potential dropouts. Therefore the subject population may have been different from those in the other schools.

The data from this study clearly demonstrates that truants feel less worthy than nontruants. This being so, the current punitive and coersive programs of most schools simply exacerbate the conditions. To some extent the schools are responding in the only way they know. Hopefully, we as concerned researchers will further explore the use and consequences of explicit positive treatments. The ISS offers a means to identify particular dimensions of self-esteem in which individual wayward youth feel deficient. The scale as it now exists is capable of giving a profile of individual self-esteems.

The most important work remains. The development and testing of explicit, effective programs for rehabilitating the self-esteem of these troubled students and thereby reducing their dehabilitating and disruptive behavior is yet to be achieved. I plan to be back with a report to this group in two years.

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